

CENTRALIA'S UNION MURAL

"The Resurrection of Wesley Everest" Depicts Labor's Side of the Centralia Massacre

By Mary L. Stough

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The Sentinel, a bronze statue of a doughboy from World War I, stands guard in Centralia's George Washington Park. The statue was erected to honor the memory of the four American Legion members who were killed in a "peaceful parade" on November 11, 1919. Ironically, it is only a few yards from the historical mural painted on the former Elks Building that depicts Wesley Everest—a veteran of the same war—who was hanged on that first Armistice Day. The mural is titled, "The Resurrection of Wesley Everest."

John Regan, who owns the former Elks building, was aware that there was no mural depicting this particular piece of Centralia history. He felt it was time labor's side of the "Centralia Massacre" was represented, and he wanted a mural that would tell the story. There were many people who did not want the lynching of Wesley Everest resurrected. "It's no concern of yours," they told him. "It's history." But not history that everyone was willing to face.

Regan contacted Mike Alewitz, a well-known and respected labor muralist. Alewitz had created a mural in Chernobyl where 31 workers were killed in a nuclear accident and 135,000 persons living in the vicinity were evacuated. He had also collaborated with muralists in Mexico and Nicaragua, helping to celebrate the dignity of the workers. Alewitz was a wise choice for the Everest mural project because he knew the history of the Centralia tragedy and understood Everest's fervor and dedication to the goals of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or Wobblies). Though comparatively little known, the IWW is still in existence today.

Who was this man, Nathan Wesley Everest, revered by some as a martyr, reviled by others as a murderer? And what were the events that led to the killing of the four legionnaires and the lynching of a Wobbly on that first Armistice Day celebrating the war that was to end all wars?

In 1904 Everest, then 14, was orphaned and sent to live with his great aunt, Mrs. O. B. Westfall, who operated a dairy farm near Portland, Oregon. When he was 17, Wesley decided the life of a logger was more to his liking. The daily wage of \$1.84 for a ten-hour day offered him independence if not financial security. He soon embraced the philosophy of the IWW, which included agitating for an eight-hour day, safer working conditions, better living conditions, and no discrimination against IWW members.

Known as an efficient and enthusiastic organizer, Everest was sent from one logging town to another to recruit new members. When he first arrived in Centralia, he was already acquainted with vigilante justice. In Coos Bay, Oregon, he and another organizer had been arrested and jailed, but before the law could take its course, a contingent of 300 businessmen took the two from jail and put them aboard a boat. They were taken across the bay to Jarvis Landing where they were told to get out and start walking.

As Northwest loggers continued to make demands for safer working and living conditions, higher pay and an eight-hour work day, they were met with implacable resistance on the part of the timber and sawmill owners. Large posters listing the IWW demands were circulated in public places as well as logging camps. Among their demands were "sanitary sleeping quarters with not more than 12 men in each bunkhouse . . . Laundry rooms with shower baths to be installed."

The typical logging camp had a shack containing three tiers of plank bunks extending along the walls, with a wood stove in the middle. Loggers were expected to carry their own bedding which they rolled and tied with a piece of rope. There was no first aid or medical attention available for injuries on the job.

The IWW was aggressive in recruiting and organizing, radical and offensive (to employers) in its literature. The chain of events that led to what has been called the "Centralia Massacre" probably began in 1915 when vigilante action against the IWW first took place in Centralia. Men looking for work and food were run out of town by "special policemen" who helped the authorities rid the town of the Wobblies. *The Centralia Chronicle* praised the "public-spirited" citizens for keeping the city clear of these people. Centralians mirrored the national sentiment about the Wobblies: they were considered "troublemakers, thieves, liars and bums." According to many newspaper editorials of the day, the IWW intended to destroy America's economic system. They were not entirely wrong—the IWW called for the abolition of the wage system in favor of then-unheard-of, worker-owned businesses.

In May of the year that would see the end of World War I, members of the Centralia Home Guard and Elks marched in a parade to raise money for the Red Cross. The marchers broke ranks in front of the IWW hall and raided it, throwing furniture, records and Wobbly literature into the street and setting it on fire. A desk and phonograph from the hall were auctioned off and the money donated to the Red Cross. The men inside the hall were "lifted by their ears" into a truck, driven out of town where they were forced to run the gauntlet while being beaten with sticks and ax handles.

At a meeting of the Centralia Protective Association in October 1919, a vigilante threat had been made "to handle the Wobblies [the] way they did in Aberdeen. Clean 'em up; burn 'em out." By the first week of November rumors about an intended raid during the Armistice Day parade were an open secret. The Wobblies were very aware of what they could expect based on past experience. This time the IWW members sought legal advice from their attorney, Elmer Smith, and were told that they had the right to defend themselves and the hall. It was the legionnaires who were surprised when the Wobblies did just that. The hostility that had been seething for years between the businessmen, the American Legion and the IWW came to its flash point during the parade. Years of smoldering anger on both sides now became a class war.

All of the marchers had passed the IWW hall except for the Centralia contingent; as they moved ahead to close the gap, the command of "Halt!" was given in front of the hall. The sounds of a door being kicked in were mixed with glass breaking and shots being fired. The hall was raided; the Wobblies defended their hall, and two legionnaires were killed. When Wesley Everest who was armed and inside the IWW hall tried to make his escape, he shot two of the men who were pursuing him. Now there were four legionnaires dead. The need to exact instant retribution overcame the survivors; Everest was captured and almost hanged before he was taken to jail. That night the power was cut off in Centralia and Everest was taken from the jail there to a bridge over the Chehalis River and hanged.

In the 80 years since the deaths of the legionnaires and the subsequent trial of 11 men for the murder of legionnaire Warren Grimm, the enmity between the American Legion and the IWW has never diminished. There are those who say that the style of art chosen for the "Resurrection of Wesley Everest" is out of sync with the other historic murals in Centralia. It does not depict a historical event but instead provides a jarring symbolic picture of the plight of workers in 1919, offering nothing toward a lessening of tension between the unions, workers and righteously adamant legionnaires who still consider Everest's fate justly deserved.

Although the artist was knowledgeable about the lynching of Wesley Everest and the outcome of the trial of the accused Wobblies, his mural does not try to portray the events that happened on or subsequent to November 11, 1919. He was directed by the Committee for the Centralia Union Mural Project, which included labor unionists, business people, students, IWW members and retired people, all of whom agreed to name the mural the "Resurrection of Wesley Everest." It could have been called the "Resurrection of Labor." The mural memorializes the men who worked in the woods; they were exploited and their labor given no dignity. While some feel that Everest died a martyr to the cause, he is remembered by others as the man who killed two legionnaires on November 11, 1919. The mural committee still hopes that the controversial painting will provide the inspiration for a dialogue without animosity between these two opposing points of view.

Everest is the focal figure of the mural. He is drawn symbolically with his arms raised triumphantly, dressed half worker in overalls and half veteran in a World War I uniform. Black cats are shown as the Wobbly symbol of defiance; a pig representing the profiteers of war is leaning on bags of gold. Angels on the top of the mural are hanging from a long saw—the "misery whip" of the loggers—and below that is a pie denoting "pie in the sky," the happiness that workers could look forward to when they died.

In the far left of the mural stands a man in dark glasses holding a labor newspaper, the *Industrial Worker*. The man is Tom Lassiter, a partially blind Wobbly sympathizer who sold labor papers at his newsstand. After he was threatened, kidnapped and his papers were destroyed, Lassiter was warned never to set foot in Centralia again.

Across the bottom of the picture flames lick up, consuming workers who are shown as prisoners. As grim as this scene is, the artist is not without a sense of humor. A small volcano emitting a plume of smoke and sporting a pair of glasses was Alewitz's thank-you to the mural committee's co-chair, Helen Lee, director of the Evergreen State College Labor Center. He called it Mount Helen Lee!

Centralia continues to inch forward as the millennium approaches. It is now a city severed by an interstate highway. On either side of the freeway, visible to traffic, are clustered factory outlet stores, fast-food restaurants and motels that offer mostly minimum wage jobs. The labor scene today lacks the bitterness and passion that existed in 1919, but the economic situation is not so different for many of the new immigrants from Southeast Asia, Mexico and Central America.

And like the earlier European immigrants, they are not always made to feel welcome. Helen Lee, speaking for the committee members of the Centralia Union Mural Project, hopes that the

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"Resurrection of Wesley Everest" will inspire a look back at history as well as forward toward a just and prosperous economic future for all Centralians.

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